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ABSTRACT

Extensive research in the area of vocabulary development revealed a very limited amount of information on elaboration for writing. Only one article was found that substantiated the need to connect vocabulary with elaborative writing. This topical bibliography and commentary summarizes the findings in that article. The bibliography/ commentary considers the following: the levels of vocabulary proficiency, methods of teaching vocabulary, context in discovering the meaning of unfamiliar words, review activities to enhance a student's vocabulary, elaboration, and finally, using the new vocabulary in writing. It concludes that research has shown that a learner's writing vocabulary is the highest level of cognitive development, indicating that students would greatly benefit from learning to use new vocabulary with an elaboration for writing. Lists 2 Internet resources and 1 reference. (NKA)

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Vocabulary Development: Elaboration for Writing

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Introduction

After extensive research in the area of vocabulary development, elaboration for writing, it was determined that a very limited amount of information is available. One article was found that substantiated the need to connect vocabulary with elaborative writing. This paper will summarize the findings of that article.

Levels of Vocabulary Proficiency

Most educators think of vocabulary as one skill, taught many different ways. However, there are many different levels of vocabulary proficiency that a student must work through. Coomber, Peet, and Smith (1998) describe these levels as the following:

- **Listening vocabulary** is composed of words whose meanings we recognize when we hear them.
- **Reading vocabulary** is composed of words whose meanings we recognize when we encounter them in our reading.
- **Writing vocabulary** is composed of words we know well enough that we could use them in our writing.
- **Speaking vocabulary** is composed of words we use in our speaking (p. 10).

Students who have mastered a vocabulary word at one level may not have mastered the word at a different level. In fact, "reading vocabularies are usually largest, followed by listening vocabularies, since speech is less formal than writing, we normally encounter more complex words in what we read than in what we hear" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 10). Writing vocabulary is the third most used, followed by speaking. As a result, students must master the ability to understand new words through listening first and reading second before they can learn to use vocabulary as an elaboration for writing.

Methods of Teaching Vocabulary

There are many theories as to the correct way to teach vocabulary as an elaborative process, defined as one in which "learners engage in a depth of thinking that creates many connections between the target word and their own experiences or other knowledge" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 14). Again, this means mastering vocabulary at different levels. Four factors affect the methods used in teaching vocabulary:

- **Active processing:** When students are doing something with a word more than just parroting a definition—they are more likely to remember that word.
- **Different contexts:** We can learn much about a word's meaning through different contexts in which it is used. And the more different contexts we encounter with that word, the more flexible we become with that word and its meaning and the more likely it is that we will remember it.
- **Using several techniques for reviewing that word instead of only one:** Just as learners acquire vocabulary more readily through encountering

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words in varying contexts, varying kinds of review activities apparently enhance vocabulary development. Each review activity reveals a word and its meaning in a different way, offering its own perspective on the word and its meaning.

- **Elaborative processing:** ...questions or activities or exercises that call for more mental effort and more decisions lead to superior learning (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, pp. 13-14).

Context

Context is the most widely used strategy for discovering the meaning of unfamiliar words. Students must be able to master this skill in order to develop a better reading vocabulary. There are two different types of context: syntactic and semantic. Syntactic context "refers to the grammar of a sentence—how words relate to each other structurally in sentences and in units of discourse beyond the sentence." Semantic context "refers to meaning and the way word meanings relate to one another in context" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 20).

Using nonsense words is one effective way to teach vocabulary in context. The student is then forced to examine the rest of the sentence to decide on the meaning of the context word (example: The rich man was so *shortled* he didn't have to work for a living).

The learner should be able to identify *shortled* as a verb, using syntactic context, and through discussion be able to identify a meaning for the nonsense word.

Another method of teaching context has been termed *cloze* which is simply having students fill in the blanks. For example: My dogs like to catch _____. Students could fill in a variety of different words. Cloze can be as simple as one sentence or as complex as an entire essay. This method of teaching has been found helpful with English as a second language, early readers, and at-risk students.

Sentence combining is also a method used to teach context. "Sentence combining requires learners to look at the larger picture of the relationships of words in sentences" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 28). When students are able to preserve the meaning after combining two or more sentences, they are learning to use context. Students can also decombine sentences to focus on vocabulary. This also helps strengthen context.

When students are able to understand the context of a target word, they are ready to understand the definition of a new word using context clues. Listed below are six of the most commonly used context clues:

- **Experience or background:** Having lived on the northern plains for years, Clare prepared for the *frigid* temperatures of winter by gathering a good supply of fuel.
- **Comparison or contrast:** Ryan predicted that the committee would be open to his plan, but he found committee members *intransigent* and unwilling to consider any change.
- **Summary:** It was a scene of *confrontation*, with the strikers clustered on the side of the room, the boss and her assistants in a group on the other side, and an army of police officers standing guard.
- **Association:** Brown eyes, black hair, and even that funny little smile we have are *hereditary* gifts from our ancestors.
- **Reflection of a mood or situation:** We entered the abandoned house through a broken, creaky door. Plaster fell from the walls and ceiling, and cobwebs stretched across several windows. All that remained was a scene of *desolation* (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, pp. 32-33).

Review Activities

Another way to enhance a student's vocabulary is to use several different review activities. Working a crossword puzzle is one example. Students are apt to use a variety of clues including synonyms, antonyms and definitions to figure out the puzzle. Another popular method of strengthening vocabulary is using an exercise termed *The Outsider* (Coomber, Peet and Smith, 1998, p. 41). Four words are put together. Three of them have something in common; the other is an *outsider*. For example, a student may be given the words: *nervous*,

anxious, calm and desperate. Students should be able to define the meaning of the three similar words, pick out the outsider, and develop a meaning for it.

Using word structure is one more means of teaching vocabulary. Word structure is the "combination of roots and affixes that provide the components of most polysyllabic words" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 42). Of course students must have a good working knowledge of the meanings of commonly used prefixes and suffixes. This requires teaching methods of discovering root word meaning through prefixes and suffixes. Once students are comfortable in identifying prefixes and suffixes, they will be able to decode words more easily.

Elaboration

Once students have developed a strong working vocabulary, their goal is to use their new vocabulary in their writing. Elaboration is an essential element in teaching writing vocabulary. However, there are many different ways to teach students to use an elaborative process. A writing vocabulary requires a student to have a long-term memory for new words. This requires that the student become "actively involved in the words they are learning" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 49).

Coomber, Peet, and Smith have pinpointed three different methods of elaborative practice: distinctiveness, decision-making, and generation of material. Distinctiveness involves remembering a word because it is dramatic in some fashion. "The decisions we make about something determine how well we remember that item" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 50). A student will remember the definition of a word better if he or she makes the decision to remember the word. Generation of material involves actually doing something with the word. One example of this would be to write a paragraph using a list of new vocabulary words.

One effective means of incorporating the above strategies into teaching is to teach analogies. Analogies "build thinking skills and emphasize different kinds of relationships" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 55). Currently analogies are mainly used at the high school level to prepare students for college entrance exams. However, they can be used to promote elaborative learning at all grade levels. Example of lower level analogy:

tail *bright* *creek* *tree* *laugh*

1. Waves are to water as leaves are to _____.
2. Sad is to cry as happy is to _____.
3. First is to head as last is to _____.
4. Night is to dark as day is to _____.
5. Big is to river as little is to _____. (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 56)

Analogies can be as simple as the above example or much more complex as is this:

Avarice: generous A. vicious: fierce B. humane: honorable
C. profane: crude D. greedy: unselfish

As students gain a skill for understanding analogies, they are more likely to "develop a more sophisticated thinking pattern" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 57).

Another effective means of helping strengthen vocabulary writing is through mental imagery. Students who can perceive a mental image of a word will remember the word longer. Four stages are designed to help students create mental images:

1. Make images from objects they see.
2. Make images from unseen objects.
3. Make images from high-imagery stories.
4. Make images as they read stories.

Students can also share their mental images to help other students develop an image. Associating words with people, places, objects, or experiments that they already have a mental image of will also help them to remember a word.

One other imaging strategy is motor imaging. Motor imaging, or acting out words, "significantly helps learners remember those words and the concepts behind them" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 59). Students can role-play people who are exhibiting an exact behavior.

Writing Vocabulary

The final step in vocabulary mastery is the art of being able to use new vocabulary in writing. At this level all prior skills are put into use.

> First, when students write, they must provide meaningful contexts for the words they are learning; this should encourage them to reflect on past experiences. Second, the use of target words in writing calls for processing the words at higher cognitive levels, enhancing the likelihood of retention more than would be the case if learners simply memorized lists of definitions, synonyms, and antonyms. Third, writing is a slower process than speaking or merely thinking about a word and therefore increases the likelihood that students will think in some depth about target words and will acquire them as part of long-term memory (p. 60).

Using target words in sentences is a good beginning point when teaching students to use vocabulary words in their writing. Students can use a group of given vocabulary words in writing simple sentences, a letter, or an entire paragraph. Another idea is to use quotations to strengthen target words. For example, a teacher may give the class a famous quotation with a target word underlined. The student would then respond to the quote, giving his/her opinion about the word underlined.

One method of getting students to use target words in their formal writing is to incorporate revising exercises into the assignment. After the student submits a paper, he/she can revise it using a list of target words. Giving students paragraphs to revise is another option. These activities are designed to actively involve the student in his/her learning. "Vocabulary activities that call on learners to create contexts and become actively involved in building their vocabularies result in better learning and retention" (Coomber, Peet, and Smith, 1998, p. 64).

Conclusion

While it seems that a lot has been written on teaching vocabulary, the majority of the research focuses on strengthening reading skills through vocabulary. However, the research has also shown that a learner's writing vocabulary is the highest level of cognitive development. This would indicate that students would greatly benefit from learning to use new vocabulary with an elaboration for writing.

Internet Resources

* The Clarifying Routine: Elaborating Vocabulary Instruction
This article provides a variety of tactics and strategies that can be mediated by the teacher to help students understand and remember new terms as well as the significance of important names, events, places, or processes. All involve facilitating elaboration in various ways.
http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/teaching_techniques/ellis_clarifying.html
* Vocabulary instruction
What scientifically-based research tells us about vocabulary instruction
http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/reading_first1vocab.html

Reference

Coomber, James, Peet, Howard, and Smith, Carl (1998). Teaching Vocabulary: A Method's Course Manual. 75 pages. [ED426402]

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